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Entering the Gates of the Academy: Transitions into the Professoriate

Vijay Kanagala, Ph.D.

Transitions. Preparing to enter the threshold of the professoriate at The University of Vermont (UVM), I experienced a wave of powerful emotions. A transition that was often exciting, sometimes sad, at times nervous, but most importantly one that was filled with an overwhelming sense of accomplishment, personal and professional. It was a culmination of what felt like a never-ending arduous journey that began for me as a graduate student at Iowa State University. A nearly weeklong road trip from San Antonio, TX to Burlington, VT would literally and metaphorically serve as my journey to finally arrive at the gates of the academy. In this essay for *The Vermont Connection: Shades of Transition*, as a new UVM faculty, I reflect on the gifts and the heartaches that life led me to experience over the past several years, the obstacles I overcame, the challenges I had yet to face, and the many opportunities waiting to be seized in the future.

Arriving at the Gates

With my mother Suguna, my dog Chula, and the reason for the long road trip, my four fish that I have cared for over eight years, I said goodbye to the hot Texas summers to experience the brutal Vermont winters that everyone had been warning me about. As I passed the last Texas exit, as if it were a real possibility, I remember fighting the urge to exit the highway and just turn around to return to the comfort of home that San Antonio had become for me. I was leaving behind my house, a symbol that came to represent my parents' retirement investment in my education, my community of friends and mentors, unfinished research projects, and the numerous possibilities that I had envisioned for myself during my three-year postdoctoral fellowship at The University of Texas at San Antonio. I questioned the wisdom of the universe for upsetting my carefully crafted plans, and the balance of my life, yet again, only to be quickly reminded of Rilke's (1934) advice,

You are so young, so before all beginning, and I want to beg you, as much as I can, dear sir, to be patient towards all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, that cannot be given [sic] you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live ev-

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everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer. (p.34)

Rilke was right. I had asked questions before, and I, indeed, lived my way into the answer many a time. Transitions were not new to me. I knew from experience that the unsettling feeling that wrapped my mind and heart would pass this time, too. As people in cars whizzed past in a hurry on the highway to their destinations, I realized how fortunate I was to be headed where I was going; after all I had been on the highway for a very long time navigating towards “Destination Professor.” Yet, even in that rare moment of clarity, my transition felt difficult to embrace. As if it were the first in my life, my transition felt momentous like none before.

The invitation to interview at UVM for the tenure track Assistant Professor position in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration (HESA) program, and the subsequent acceptance of the job offer seemed like one of those romanticized opportunities coming to fruition for an emerging scholar. My parents and I were ecstatic! For my parents, especially my father, this opportunity was a culmination of my family’s journey across continents. Finally, life was presenting his youngest son with an opportunity to “settle down.” For my tenth-grade educated mother, who had moved in with me during my doctoral program, this win belonged to her as much as it did to me. After all, she too was part of my entire doctoral journey a few years ago.

As a Generation 1.5 immigrant and the first in my family to graduate with a doctoral degree, the invitation to interview in itself represented a profound moment of validation for me. It was a rite of passage; a jury of scholars at an institution of higher education believed that I was worthy of being faculty. It was profound for me because during my graduate preparation, my mentor and academic mother, Dr. Laura I. Rendón, changed my destiny by planting a seed of hope. When I had been frustrated that none of my courses and curricula reflected my experience as an immigrant of South Asian/Desi origin, my wise Latina mentor suggested that I had two options: (1) I could be angry and upset about the lack of representation and the invisibility of my story and experiences in the literature, or (2) I could do something about it. And, she quickly added that by “something,” she meant I could aspire to be a faculty scholar, who could then reframe the curriculum. Thus began my aspirations to arrive at the gates of the professoriate.

Student Transitions

Driving northward through the continent, and as the landscape changed and the miles to my final destination decreased, my intellectual consciousness underwent a recognizable shift in approaching the opportunities and challenges that awaited me at UVM. This transition was not just about me. I wondered about my future

students in the HESA program. The students I was going to be teaching, mentoring and learning with as a new faculty of Color. How were these students entering their thresholds of transition to graduate school? Possibly, in the chaos that accompanies every transition, I imagined these young brilliant minds wanting to stay back wherever they were coming from to be with the familiar, yet I reasoned that their adventurous spirits would urge them to leave and explore the unknown. After all, they too were probably going through much of what I was experiencing in their own unique ways. Some may have just finished their undergraduate degrees and were guided by their mentors towards graduate education; others perhaps returning to the academy after years of practice to further their knowledge about student affairs through coursework; all leaving behind old friends and family to start anew in a community that may not feel like home, yet.

Many of these young scholar-practitioner-activists, I imagined, would be entering the program or already waiting for me with a thirst for knowledge and learning, and with hopes and dreams to figure out new ways of thinking and feeling to address issues of social justice and inequity. They, like me, would have arrived at the gates of the academy from diverse backgrounds armed with an arsenal of wisdom and experiences to tackle contemporary issues of higher education and student affairs. However, in another moment of clarity, I acknowledged a new reality that I was going to be part of.

HESA Transitions

Just like my students and I, the HESA program, my academic home, also experienced transition; in fact it was a dramatic one. As I was arriving at the gates of UVM, with the retirement of three HESA faculty and staff – Dr. Kathy Manning, Dr. Jill Tarule, and Ms. Diana Dubuque – nearly one hundred years of experience and wisdom departed Mann Hall. I attempted to make sense of this transition while settling into my new role as an Assistant Professor in Kathy’s old office. Was this transition a challenge or an opportunity for HESA?

It is an undeniable fact that a transition of this magnitude is of course, a challenge. On one hand, to lose beloved faculty and staff who have long fostered programmatic stability, maintained rigor, and who were guardians of valuable institutional and relational histories in one go is certainly hard to come to terms with, for students and alumni alike, but most especially for current students for whom all this change happening at once could be confusing. On the other hand, it is most definitely an opportunity for HESA to achieve the next level of excellence and in the process transform itself to be a cutting edge practitioner-scholar-activist student affairs program. Through this transformation, a HESA filled with new hopes and endless possibilities was being birthed. And, I could not have better colleagues to influence and witness this transformation with. Dr. Deb Hunter

continues to guide HESA with her calming presence and thoughtful leadership. A kindred spirit, Dr. Kelly Clark/Keefe, the other new faculty, has been my partner on this new adventure. And anyone who walks into the HESA office is welcomed by the warmth and kindness of our new administrative assistant Ms. Margie Dunki-Jacobs.

Pledge to The Vermont Connection

After five months at UVM, I am slowly starting to make Mann Hall 210B my own. Boxes still need to be unpacked, and I am still learning my way around campus. Deb, Kelly, Margie, and I are settling into our new routines. The demands of the tenure-track process are now real; publish or perish, I am reminded. I enjoy the serenity that Lake Champlain offers and continue to walk Chula along the bike path everyday. My mother and I have been welcomed into the community that it is beginning to feel like home in Burlington. But most importantly, I want to believe that many of the current students and I are building mutual trust.

Eventually, new courses will be offered. Novel possibilities to grow HESA will be explored. Perhaps, more new faculty may be hired (we can all hope, can't we?). As a cohort of HESA students prepares to graduate, I find myself wanting to counsel them to live the questions. Soon they will entrust the gifts of their HESA stories and experiences to a new journey. Mann Hall and Nicholson House will await the arrival of another cohort of students excitedly hoping to make new memories and experiences. Together, I am confident that we will write the next chapter of our own HESAstory.

All these transitions are inevitable. But, having witnessed this program these past few months, I am certain that the old adage, change is the only constant, could never be more wrong when it comes to HESA. Despite these transitions, HESA will always be the constant in our lives. That is my pledge to the legacy of The Vermont Connection.

Reference

Rilke, R. M. 1934. Letters to a young poet. Translated by M. D. Herter Norton. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. (Original work published 1929; original letter written in 1903.)